

The
Economist

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Dale Farm's gypsies

Travellers' travails

Conflicts are growing between gypsies and residents

Aug 12th 2010 | BASILDON

"WE WON'T GO", proclaims a banner at Dale Farm, one of the largest encampments of gypsies and travellers in England. Half of those living on the Essex site—around 50 families—face eviction by the local council, Basildon. Its leader, Tony Ball, has staked his reputation on removing them. Travellers at nearby Hovefields could also be evicted within weeks.

Dale Farm has become an iconic battle in a long and bitter conflict. Gypsies (of Roma descent) and travellers (often of Irish extraction) arrived at the former scrapyard over 40 years ago. More flocked in a decade ago, buying protected greenbelt land and applying for retrospective permission to live there. Around 40 families are legal; the rest are not. Violence is expected during the eviction, and the local Catholic church has offered to shelter the vulnerable.

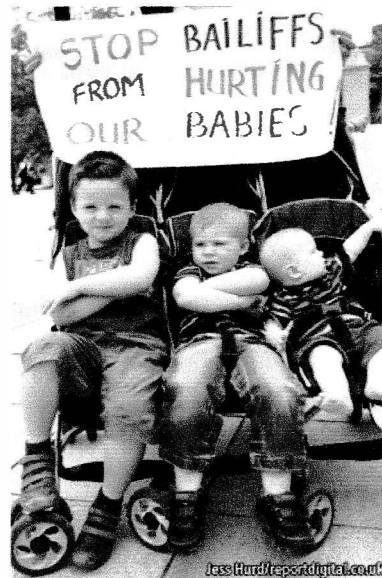
The site looks scruffier than it did four years ago, when this correspondent last visited it. Litter drifts around empty pitches, wasps hover near overflowing bins and dogs bark outside each embattled caravan. But indoors the homes are spotless. Mary-Ann McCarthy, who keeps one of them, is depressed. Glancing at a statue of the Virgin Mary, she says, "They call us nasty thieving gypsies but we are Christian folk. They want to destroy our way of life. Everyone has rights, except for us." She has been offered a small bedsit, but wants to be near her five daughters and 21 grandchildren, who visit her every day.

The issue of how and where travellers are to live has come to a crisis point, and not only at Dale Farm. The previous, Labour government required local authorities to find land for them and offered £150m (\$235m) over five years to pay for it. But progress was slow, not least because many residents objected to new sites. The Equality and Human Rights Commission reported last year that councils would need to double their speed to meet the target of 5,733 extra pitches in England by 2011.

This sluggishness has left about a fifth of all gypsies and travellers with nowhere legal to live. Many have taken matters into their own hands, including some in the village of Meriden, in Warwickshire.

As at Dale Farm, a group of gypsies bought greenbelt land and moved on to it in May, applying only after that for permission to set up their caravans there. The villagers mounted a 24-hour blockade to prevent the gypsies from bringing building supplies into the field (the courts later forced them to allow sewerage works).

David McGrath, who speaks for the Meriden campaigners, says the gypsies have damaged a "designated wildlife site" in a precious "green lung". "We are sympathetic," he says, "but the gypsy and traveller community, fundamentally, are... adopting a cavalier approach to development. What they are doing is unethical and inappropriate." The gypsies, who have lost the latest legal round in the fight to stay, say they have nowhere else to go.



They also have fewer friends in high places these days. The new government has taken a robust line, withdrawing funding for new sites, scrapping targets and considering limits on retrospective permission. Eric Pickles, the secretary for communities and local government, brands the previous policy a "failure". He plans to offer local areas financial incentives to create new sites. But new legislation to promote localism is likely to strengthen the hand of residents who resist them.

Grattan Puxon of the Gypsy Council says his members feel "under great pressure now" in Britain and abroad. The French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, has ordered the expulsion from France of all illegal gypsy immigrants, sparking a big eviction and a riot.

In Basildon Mr Ball says that he sympathises with the gypsies but all avenues except eviction have been exhausted. The council has offered "bricks and mortar" accommodation to all those it is obliged to house, he says. When asked where the gypsies are to go if they turn that down, he remarks that "they came from somewhere. One has to draw the line at some point. All our authorised sites are full up." After the eviction, he says, the encampment might well become allotments.

Britain

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